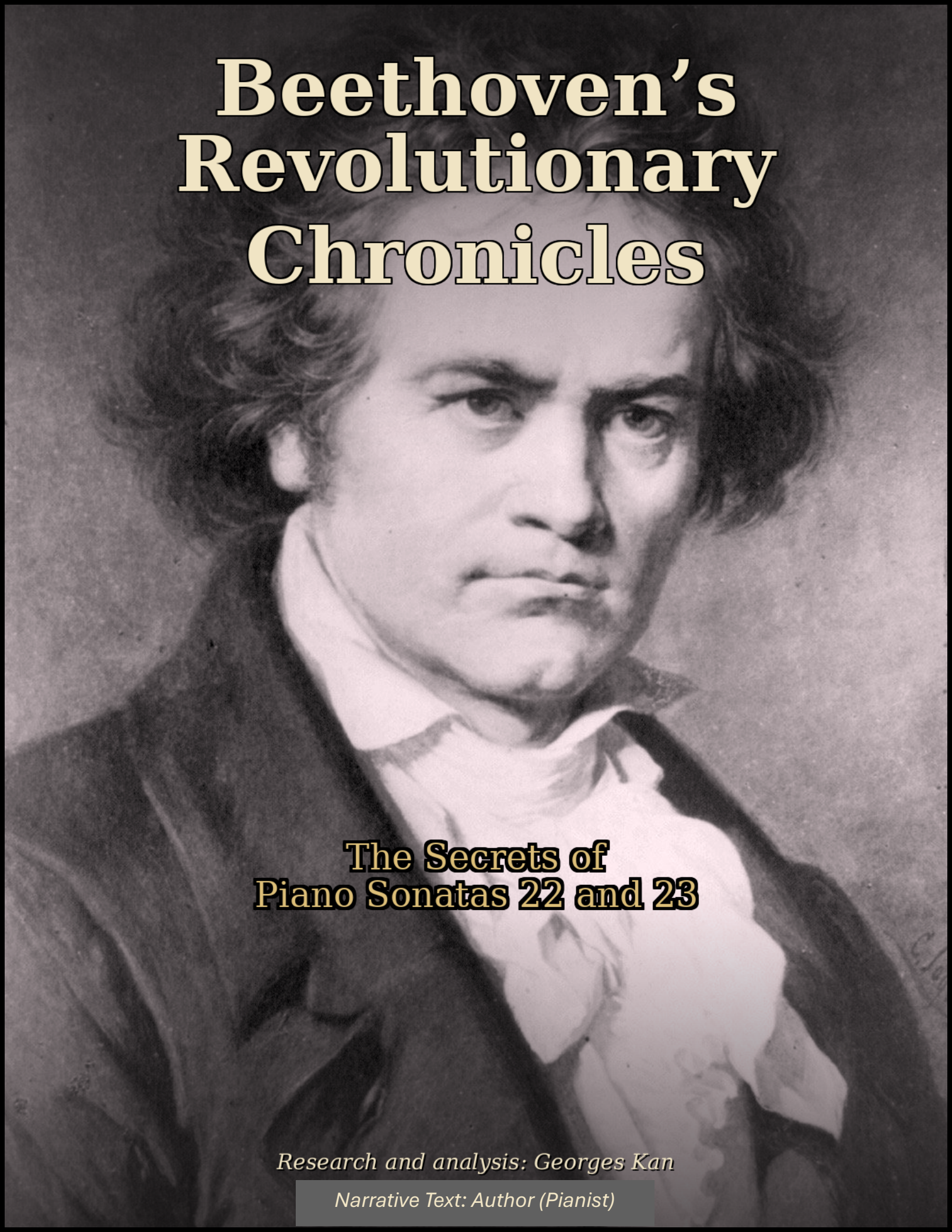


Beethoven's Revolutionary Chronicles

The Secrets of Piano Sonatas 22 and 23

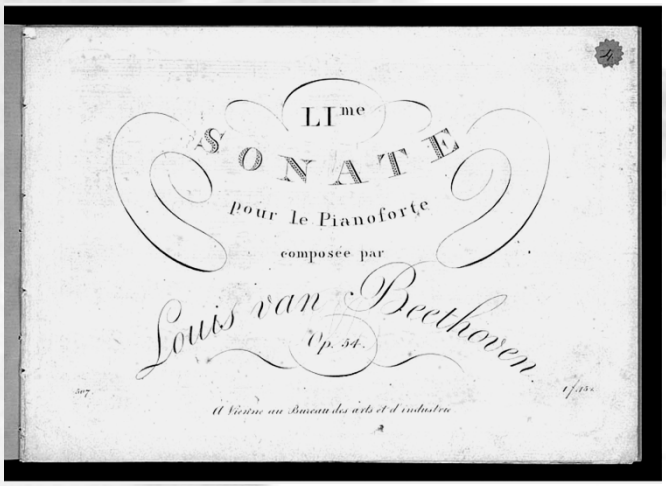
Research and analysis: Georges Kan

Narrative Text: Author (Pianist)

Louis[1] van Beethoven

Piano Sonata No. 22 in F major, Op. 54

"The Secret Chronicle"



Beethoven arrived in Vienna in 1792 — the very year of Valmy — carrying with him the idealism of the Rhineland, where French Revolutionary armies were welcomed as liberators. Valmy was no ordinary skirmish: it was the moment in September 1792 when a ragged Revolutionary force halted the Prussian professional army in its march on Paris, saving the Republic in its infancy and shocking the monarchies of Europe. Goethe, who witnessed it firsthand, wrote that he told the soldiers that evening: *"From this place and from this day forth begins a new chapter in the history of the world."*[2] By 1798 Beethoven was in regular contact with Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, Napoleon's ambassador to Vienna, whose circle gave him intimate access to Revolutionary intelligence — the reality of the battlefield, the fate of the monarchy, the emerging cult of Bonaparte. These were not abstractions but living history, and they left encrypted traces in his music.

The cover of the first edition carries the inscription *LI me SONATE* — ostensibly its number in the publisher's catalogue, but a triple encryption: LI contains VI (the regnal number of Louis XVI), whose intertwined letters V and Y collapse geometrically into a barred V and an I (the ancient root of L, pointing to Valmy), the whole resolving into a secret monument to both the king's fate and the battle that sealed the Revolution's survival.[3] The same passion that later drove Beethoven to tear the dedicatory page from the *Eroica* Symphony when Napoleon declared himself Emperor — that sense of Revolutionary betrayal —

animates these two movements, composed in the same white heat as the Third Symphony itself.[4]

I. In Tempo d'un Menuetto

Behind the courtly formality of this minuet lies a clandestine portrait of Revolutionary Paris and a royal tragedy in three acts. The left hand quietly quotes the six quavers of Exaudet's *Minuet* — the very melody commandeered by a popular Revolutionary parody celebrating Dr. Guillotin's machine — while the movement's title conceals its own pun: *In Tempo di un Minuet tô(t)*, "soon" carrying the shadow of death. The harsh triplets in octaves are the sound of the march to the scaffold, each phrase ending with the abrupt drop of the blade. In the reprise, panicked offbeat sighs in the upper voice trace Marie-Antoinette's anguish while the king's music continues almost unchanged below — two people sharing the same terrible fate with different composure. The royal convoy, caught at Varennes and returned to Paris, is caricatured in dotted rhythms mimicking its humiliated pace. The final return of the minuet, now superimposed on a martial triplet accompaniment, is no escape — it is the procession to the guillotine.[5]

II. Allegretto — Piú Allegro

Beethoven's second movement has an unexpected witness. Goethe stood on the battlefield at Valmy and described sounds "composed of the hum of the spinning top, the splashing of water, and the whistle of a bird" — war heard as something almost dreamlike. The *Allegretto's* perpetual sixteenth-note motion maps that battlefield with uncanny precision: distance giving way to close combat, the charge, the cannonade with its chain explosions and echo effects, and Doppler-like chromatic slides evoking cannonballs in flight. The groans of the dying emerge in a cycle of fifths played deliberately out of time. Then the *Piú Allegro* sweeps everything before it into triumph: the Prussians have retreated, the Revolution has survived, and Beethoven — who knew through Bernadotte exactly what had been at stake — makes certain we feel it.

Research and analysis: Georges Kan[3]
Narrative text: Author (Pianist)

---

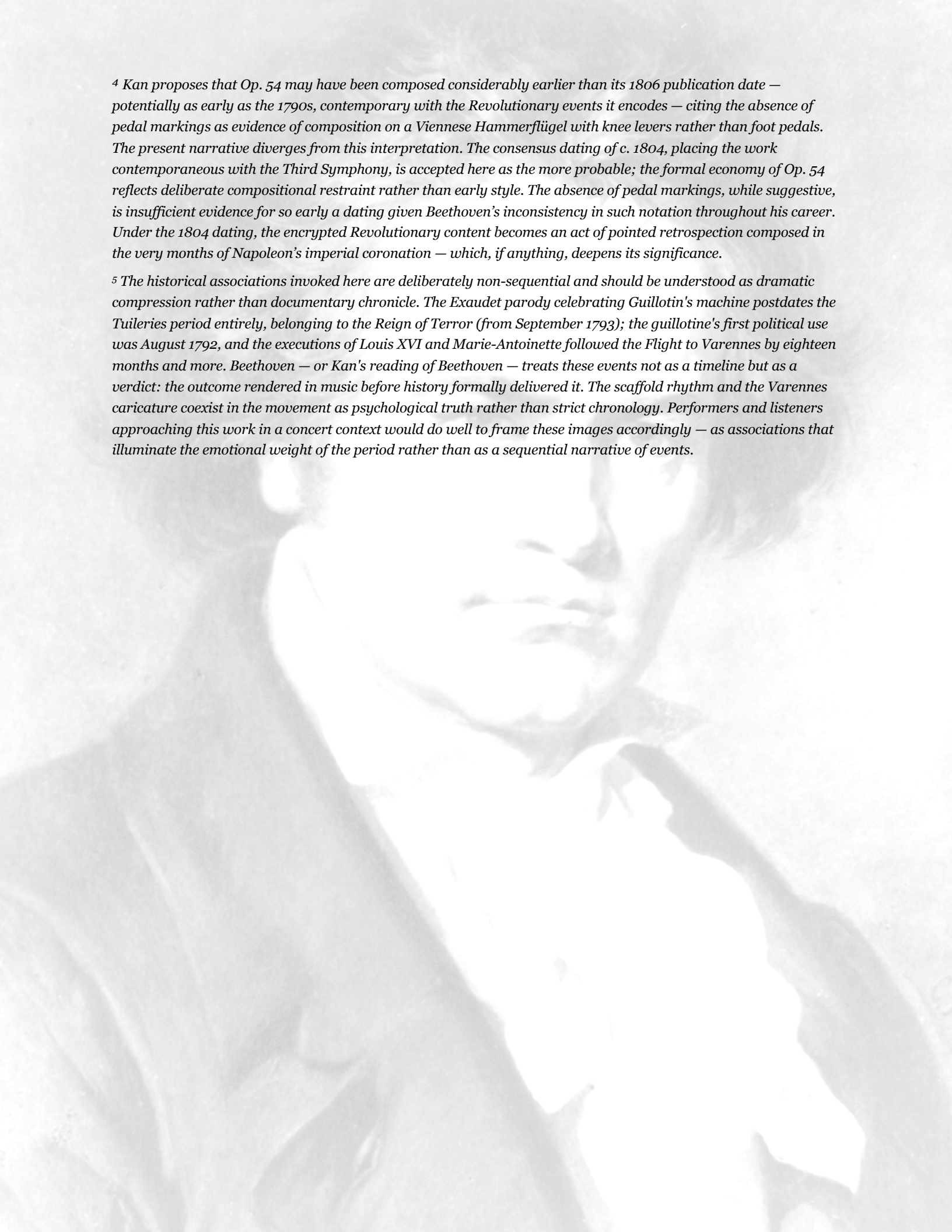
[1] Per original published manuscript (Opus 54 and Opus 57)

[2] Goethe, Campagne de France, trans. Porchat

[3] Georges Kan, "L'histoire cryptée des Sonates opus 54 & 57 de Beethoven," physinfo.org

[4] *Kan proposes that Op. 54 may have been composed considerably earlier than its 1806 publication date — potentially as early as the 1790s, contemporary with the Revolutionary events it encodes — citing the absence of pedal markings as evidence of composition on a Viennese Hammerflügel with knee levers rather than foot pedals. The present narrative diverges from this interpretation. The consensus dating of c. 1804, placing the work contemporaneous with the Third Symphony, is accepted here as the more probable; the formal economy of Op. 54 reflects deliberate compositional restraint rather than early style. The absence of pedal markings, while suggestive, is insufficient evidence for so early a dating given Beethoven's inconsistency in such notation throughout his career. Under the 1804 dating, the encrypted Revolutionary content becomes an act of pointed retrospection composed in the very months of Napoleon's imperial coronation — which, if anything, deepens its significance.*

[5] *The historical associations invoked here are deliberately non-sequential and should be understood as dramatic compression rather than documentary chronicle. The Exaudet parody celebrating Guillotin's machine postdates the Tuileries period entirely, belonging to the Reign of Terror (from September 1793); the guillotine's first political use was August 1792, and the executions of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette followed the Flight to Varennes by eighteen months and more. Beethoven — or Kan's reading of Beethoven — treats these events not as a timeline but as a verdict: the outcome rendered in music before history formally delivered it. The scaffold rhythm and the Varennes caricature coexist in the movement as psychological truth rather than strict chronology. Performers and listeners approaching this work in a concert context would do well to frame these images accordingly — as associations that illuminate the emotional weight of the period rather than as a sequential narrative of events.*



Louis van Beethoven

Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57

"Napoléon à Rivoli"

Beethoven arrived in Vienna in 1792 carrying the idealism of the Rhineland, where French Revolutionary armies were welcomed as liberators. By 1798 he was in regular contact with Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, Napoleon's ambassador to Vienna, whose circle gave him intimate access to Revolutionary intelligence — the reality of the battlefield, the fate of the monarchy, the emerging cult of Bonaparte. These were not abstractions but living history, and they left encrypted traces in his music. Where his companion sonata Op. 54, composed the same year, encoded the Flight to Varennes and the Battle of Valmy within its cover inscription *LI me SONATE*, Op. 57 deepens the clandestine chronicle. Beethoven had manipulated his publisher, the Bureau des Arts et d'Industrie, into releasing both sonatas at precisely calculated moments in the firm's cumulative catalogue — engineering the inscriptions *LI me SONATE* and *LIV me SONATE* on their respective covers while concealing his subversive intent entirely. The publisher, seeing only innocuous catalogue numbers, was unwittingly complicit. Op. 57's *LIV* decomposes as LI (the Revolution, encoding Louis XVI and Valmy) and [An]**V** — the pivot letter of *Rivoli*, its bracketed syllables dropped in the manner of a Revolutionary-era rebus — the whole resolving to "Napoléon à Rivoli." The Battle of Rivoli in January 1797, in which Bonaparte shattered the Austrian relief army and secured French dominance of northern Italy, was the military culmination of everything Valmy had made possible. The two sonatas form a diptych: the Revolution's survival on one side, its greatest early triumph on the other. That the

same hand which encoded these two monuments to Revolutionary idealism would later tear Napoleon's name from the *Eroica* dedication is not contradiction but completion — the full arc of a belief, from its birth at Valmy to its betrayal at Notre-Dame.

The cover carried one further layer of concealment: the dedication to Count François de Brunswik, a Hungarian nobleman and close friend, whose name draws the eye naturally away from the encrypted *LIV me* above. Genuine affection made the perfect screen. The autograph manuscript, now held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, carries its own testimony: arriving in Silesia with Prince Lichnowsky, Beethoven was enraged by his host's request that he perform for French officers quartered at the castle — and departed in a fury through a rainstorm that soaked the manuscript he carried. That the man who had secretly encoded Napoleon's greatest triumph, composing his Revolutionary diptych in the very months Napoleon declared himself Emperor (May 1804, coronation at Notre-Dame the following December) refused to play parlor music for his soldiers, then fled into the rain with the evidence — is a scene Kan's[1] reading charges with almost unbearable irony. The still-wet manuscript was sight-read on arrival by the pianist Marie Bigot, to Beethoven's astonished delight.[2] It has remained in Paris ever since.

I. Allegro assai

Napoleon in January 1797 is not yet the Emperor who would betray Beethoven's idealism — he is the Revolutionary general, blocked at Mantua, the campaign and perhaps the Republic itself hanging in the balance against the Austrian relief army under General Alvinzy. The first movement captures that fury and that danger: a martial, sometimes imperious theme punctuated by four hammering eighth notes in the bass — the same rhythmic cell Beethoven would later deploy in the Fifth Symphony — interrupted by angry chords that push back against the protagonist's will like the setbacks of the campaign itself. This is not triumphant Napoleon but embattled Napoleon, and Beethoven, who had followed these events through Bernadotte's circle, renders the tension without flinching.

II. Andante con moto

The slow movement is the vigil before battle — a night of waiting rendered as a theme and variations that shifts its own light as the hours pass. Darkness prevails in the first variation, grey dawn begins to show in the second, and by the third the sun is fully risen, the moment of decision imminent. But it is the movement's final gesture that unlocks its deepest meaning: a pianissimo, arpeggiated diminished seventh chord suspended at the threshold of the finale. This is pure apprehension — the last moment in which Napoleon could still be considered mortal, still capable of defeat — still therefore a great man rather than an emperor in Beethoven's eyes. Everything that follows — triumph, glory, and ultimately betrayal — begins on the other side of that chord. The chord is immediately repeated fortissimo at a higher octave; then a percussive dotted rhythm drives the same harmony — the bugle charge — before the body of the third movement begins. Napoleon's self-doubt, acknowledged in one breath, is annihilated in the next.

III. Allegro ma non troppo

Reinforcements arrive. The final movement announces their coming with a momentum that builds irresistibly through joy, bravery and determination, culminating in a tarantella that carries everything before it — the Austrians broken at Rivoli, Mantua fallen, the Italian campaign secured. Opus 57 ends in the headlong forward motion of a Revolution still young enough to believe in its own destiny. Beethoven, who knew through Bernadotte exactly what Rivoli had meant, and who was mythologizing rather than merely reporting, makes the triumph feel not like history but like prophecy.

Research and analysis: Georges Kan[1]
Narrative text: Author (Pianist)

---

[1] Georges Kan, "L'histoire cryptée des Sonates opus 54 & 57 de Beethoven," physinfo.org
[2] Beethoven-Haus Bonn, catalogue entry for Piano Sonata Op. 57